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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine the timing of adolescent transitions. Its first aim was to investigate the hypothesis that cumulated family adversities during childhood would predict earlier transitions in domains such as behavioral autonomy and friendship formation during adolescence. Subjects (N=1,631) were adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19 and their parents came from two different parts of the country, the former East and West Germany. This population allowed for the study's second aim, to compare effects of adversities across parts of the country that for decades were governed under different political systems. Six classes of risk factors were assessed, covering the time period before the age of 9 had been reached by the study adolescents: loss of a parent (due to divorce or death), serious illness (own or person close to self), residence change, school problems (failing a grade), unemployment of parent, and unskilled occupation of father (or mother in single-parent families). The timing of eight issues of normative psychosocial development was assessed in the areas of behavioral autonomy, opposite-sex friendship, and aspects of identity. The results revealed that, as hypothesized, groups high in cumulated adversities at the prepubertal stage showed earlier transitions to more adult behaviors in various normative issues of adolescent development. This was true for both regions of the country. The differences between adolescents low and high in adversities were more prevalent and pronounced among females, particularly those from the East. (Contains 6 figures and 10 references.) (NB)

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Psychosocial Adversities and Timing of Adolescent Transitions: A Comparison of the former East and West Germanies[1]

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The timing of adolescent transitions shows great interindividual variation. The age at which adolescents resolve such developmental tasks as the formation of steady romantic friendships or the establishment of clear career perspectives, depends on various ecological and personal factors and their interaction.

As evidenced by cross-cultural research, cultural belief systems such as collectivist orientations play an important role in

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the timing of individual responsibility and emotional autonomy (Rosenthal & Bornholt, 1988). Within national contexts, ethnic groups show differences in the timing of adolescent transitions. African-American adolescents, particularly males, are known to grow up a little faster than Whites relative to the common stereotype of adolescence (Simmons & Zhou, in press). According to research on economic hardship, severe constraints of the household economy result in earlier transitions to behavioral autonomy (Elder, Van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985), particularly among boys, in part because paternal authority and family supervision became diminished under the influence of financial pressures.

In general, a large class of adverse living conditions other than economic hardship is likely to undercut the moratorium characteristic of adolescence, typically because circumstances such as illness or divorce require that the young take over adult-like responsibilities earlier than usual, and because guidance by parents is lacking due to their being overburdened with attempts to make ends meet. Consequently, multiple opportunities for contacts with peer models of precocious, grown-up behaviors will become more prevalent in the adolescents' ecology.

However, none of the individual risk factors is likely to explain large portions of developmental outcome in general, and of the variation in timetabling in particular. Consequently, previous studies utilized cumulative indices of risks. The adversity index introduced in the study of mental health by Rutter (1979), for instance, considers such risks as severe mental illness, low SES,

large family size, and paternal criminality. The higher discriminative power of a cumulative index can be attributed to the fact that such risks influence each other and thus potentiate their individual impact.

The first aim of the present study was to investigate the hypothesis that cumulated family adversities during childhood would predict earlier transitions in domains such as behavioral autonomy and friendship formation during adolescence. In line with earlier research (Rutter, 1979), adversities that occured during childhood were seen as more important than concurrent risks.

The second aim was related to the specific nature of the sample. As part of a representative survey of young people in former East and West Germany, the study allows one to compare effects of adversities across parts of the country that for decades were governed under different political systems. More specifically, during the childhood of the adolescents under study, at least some of the adversities were likely to differ in their individual impact on family life and adolescent development. In the East, for instance, day care was available for almost every child at nominal cost, and consequently mothers' increased working hours due to a divorce or economic constraints presumably were less problematic.

Method

Sample

The sample was comprised of 826 female (516 West, 310 East) and 805 male (523 West, 282 East) adolescents aged 13 to 19 and

their parents. As logistic difficulties in the time soon after German unification ruled out to plan a probability sample, a stratified sample was organized. Drawing on existing national statistics, the strata were chosen to be representative in terms of community size, level of schooling (accomplished or achieved, depending on age), and gender. Adolescents from former East Germany and the portion of younger age-groups were overrepresented in order to have sufficient sample sizes for subgroup comparisons.

Risk Variables

The following six classes of risk factors were assessed, covering the time period before the age of 9 of the study adolescents (see Dishion, 1990): loss of a parent (due to divorce or death), serious illness (own or person close to self), residence change, school problems (failing a grade), unemployment of parent, unskilled occupation of father (mother in single parent families). Depending on the respective risk variable, the actual frequency of occurence varied between 0 and 4. The data were recoded to dichotomous scores. Between almost 0% (unemployment in the former GDR) and 14% (change in residence) of the adolescents were classified in the risk category of the respective variable.

The risk factors showed a slightly different distribution when comparing the two parts of the country. In the sample from former West Germany, for instance, divorce was more closely associated with school problems and change of residence.

The adversity index was formed by counting all instances of one or more occurences of the risk factors. The composite score

thus ranged between 0 and 6. For the purpose of the present analyses, the sample was broken down into groups low and high in adversity. The latter group was comprised of all adolescents who reported 2+ risk factors, equivalent to about the upper 10% of the distribution of the composite. The difference in the relative size of the high adversity group between East and West was minimal.

Timing of Psychosocial Transitions

The timing of the following eight issues of normative psychosocial development was assessed. The selection and wording of topics followed the model of previous nationwide youth surveys. More specifically, the adolescents were asked to report whether, and if so at what age (in full years), they had experienced transitions in the domains of behavioral autonomy (first time decide about appearance, decide when to go and when to come home, attend discotheque), opposite-sex friendship (first time fell in love, steady romantic friend, sexual experiences), and aspects of identity (first time clear conception of future occupation, participation in political discussions).

All information used in this paper was reported by the adolescents as part of more extensive personal interviews. Obviously these data represent recollections which in part refer to events that may have occured years ago. Nevertheless, the potential bias concerning the risk factors is deemed minimal as no evaluation or interpretation was requested, and because the events were rather salient anyway. With regard to the transition ages, forward

telescoping is likely to be minimal as well (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993).

Results

Our hypotheses require to test group differences in the timing of transitions, that is, differences in the time intervals between birth and the "termination" event. As a more or less considerable portion of the younger adolescents had not yet experienced the transition at the time of assessment (censored data), the termination event is either the age at transition or the age at assessment. The adequate method for the analysis of such data is survival analysis (SPSS, 1988). For each psychosocial transition, a set of survival functions was computed, allowing comparisons between a) regions (East, West), b) adversity groups (low, high), and c) adversity groups within regions. The data of males and females were analyzed separately.

In preliminary analyses the role of individual risk factors was investigated. A case in point is changes in residence. Adolescents whose family moved repeatedly during childhood reported earlier transition to romantic friendship than their agemates. As the focus of the present paper is on the analyses of the composite adversity index, further details are omitted.

The remainder of this paper is concentrated on differences in survival functions due to main and interactive effects of region and composite adversity. A convenient way to depict differences in the timing of transitions is to plot the median survival ages of the groups, given as a result of the survival analyses. These data

are shown in Figures 1 through 6. A summary of the statistical tests of group differences is given in the Table.

Table and Figures here

Gender. The differences in transition ages between males and females corresponded to what one could have expected on the basis of previous research on gender differences in adolescent development (Steinberg, 1993). For instance, females were between six and twelve months earlier in issues such as appearance and opposite-sex friendships. In contrast, males were about six months earlier concerning self-direction when to come and go.

Region. In a number of psychosocial domains, both males and females from the eastern part of the country reported earlier transition ages. This was particularly true for issues of occupational decisions, discotheque attendance, and political beliefs where the differences amounted to twelve to 18 months. The earlier timing mirrors differences in the ecology. In the East, occupational socialization used to be much more structured and predetermined by government authorities, discotheques were organized by the state youth organization and resembled more a youth club than a commercial discotheque, and politics played a role from early on (although it is unclear whether the present situation or the past was reflected in the adolescents' reports).

Adversities. Judged from the size of the differences and the number of significant effects, early adversities apparently had a

stronger effect on females compared to males. All transitions, except the age at first attendance of discotheques, were considerably earlier in females of the high adversity group. In males, the effects were generally less pronounced.

With regard to romantic feelings and steady opposite-sex friendships, for instance, the difference was particularly pronounced among females from the East who reported this to have taken place almost two years earlier. Concerning self-direction in issues of outfit and appearance, the groups struck by high adversities reported a timing between a few months and up to one year earlier than their agemates. Finally, political discussions and occupational decisions in particular were made earlier in the presence of adversities.

Discussion

As hypothesized, groups high in cumulated adversities revealed earlier transitions to more grown-up behaviors in various normative issues of adolescent development. This was true for both regions of the country. The differences between adolescents low and high in adversities were more prevalent and pronounced among females, particularly from the East. Although the latter result may be specific for the developmental domains studied, the difference between males and females presumably represents a more general manifestation of gender-typic ways of coping with adversities. From research on economic hardship it is known, for instance, that a

higher financial burden is likely to reduce the career aspirations of female adolescents (Galambos & Silbereisen, 1987).

Additional analyses on adversities that occured after the age of 9 made clear that indeed prepubertal adversities are decisive. The differences between groups high and low in adversities during adolescence were much smaller and less systematic than the ones reported above.

An assumption in using cumulative adversity indices is that the number of risks is more relevant than their very quality (Rutter, 1979). This was confirmed as parallel analyses with a differently composed index showed almost the same results. In these analyses, study children's school problems and illnesses were taken out in order to avoid a potential confound with the target variables. Instead, family size (3+ siblings) was added to the composite.

An important question is whether the results we found are independent of differences in social status which are known to correspond to differences in timetabling themselves. As parental occupation was included in the composite index, we controlled for study adolescents' educational track in school, a proxy for SES. Although students attending the lowest track were overrepresented among the high risk group, the differences in transition ages were not substantially reduced once educational level was controlled. Moreover, compared to agemates attending one of the higher tracks these students showed a slight tendency for smaller differences between groups high and low in adversity. This result on the

partial independence of the impact of adversities from SES is in line with recent research on the impact of cumulative ecological risks on other developmental outcomes (Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1993).

Finally, some caveats should not be overlooked. All data on adversities were assessed retrospectively, and particularly for older adolescents at least some of the transitions occured years prior to the investigation. Although we do not believe this to be a major drawback, a new study is underway with a much younger sample that will be assessed prospectively. At present, an interpretation of the results in terms of causal relations would be premature.

At present, we do not know yet whether, and if so for whom, earlier transitions indeed imply risks for the development of problematic behaviors. Judged from earlier research, however, this is quite likely for adolescents who additionally lack protective factors such as supportive relations with other people.

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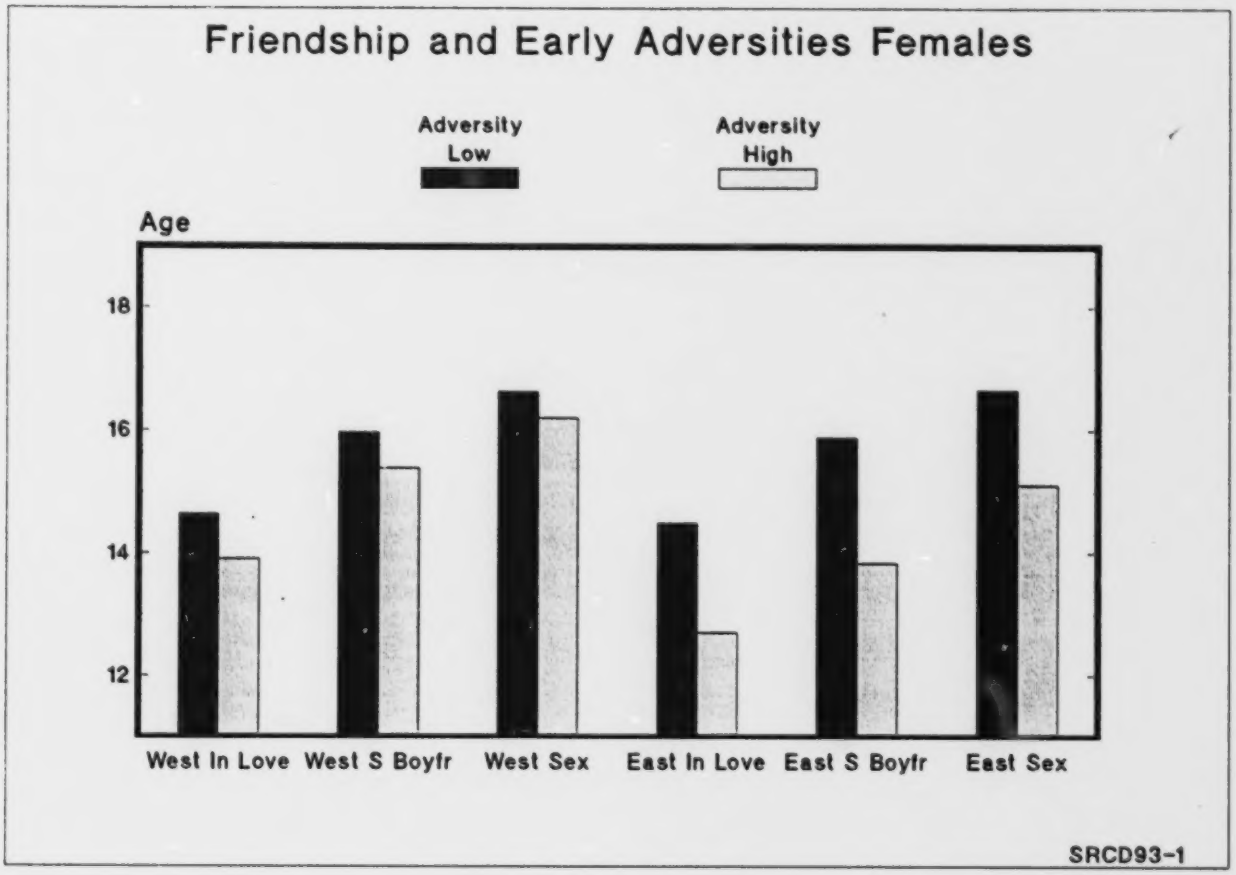
Table. Tests on Equality of Survival Function (Lee & Desu D)

	West/East	Lo/Hi	W	E
Female			L/H	L/H
In love	ns	<.001	.04	.002
Boyfriend	.03	<.001	.009	.002
Sex	ns	.04	ns	.01
Appearence	ns	<.001	.03	.002
Disco	<.001	ns	ns	.05
Going out	ns	<.001	<.001	ns
Politics	<.001	.05	ns	ns
Occupation	<.001	<.001	.002	.002
Male				
In love	ns	.006	.01	ns
Girlfriend	ns	.02	ns	.04
Sex	ns	ns	ns	ns
Appearence	ns	.02	.05	ns
Disco	<.001	ns	ns	ns
Going out	.005	.05	ns	ns
Politics	<.001	ns	ns	ns
Occupation	<.001	.001	.02	.005


Friendship and Early Adversities Females
Adversity Low
Adversity High
Age
18
16
14
12
West In Love
West S Boyfr
West Sex
East In Love
East S Boyfr
East Sex
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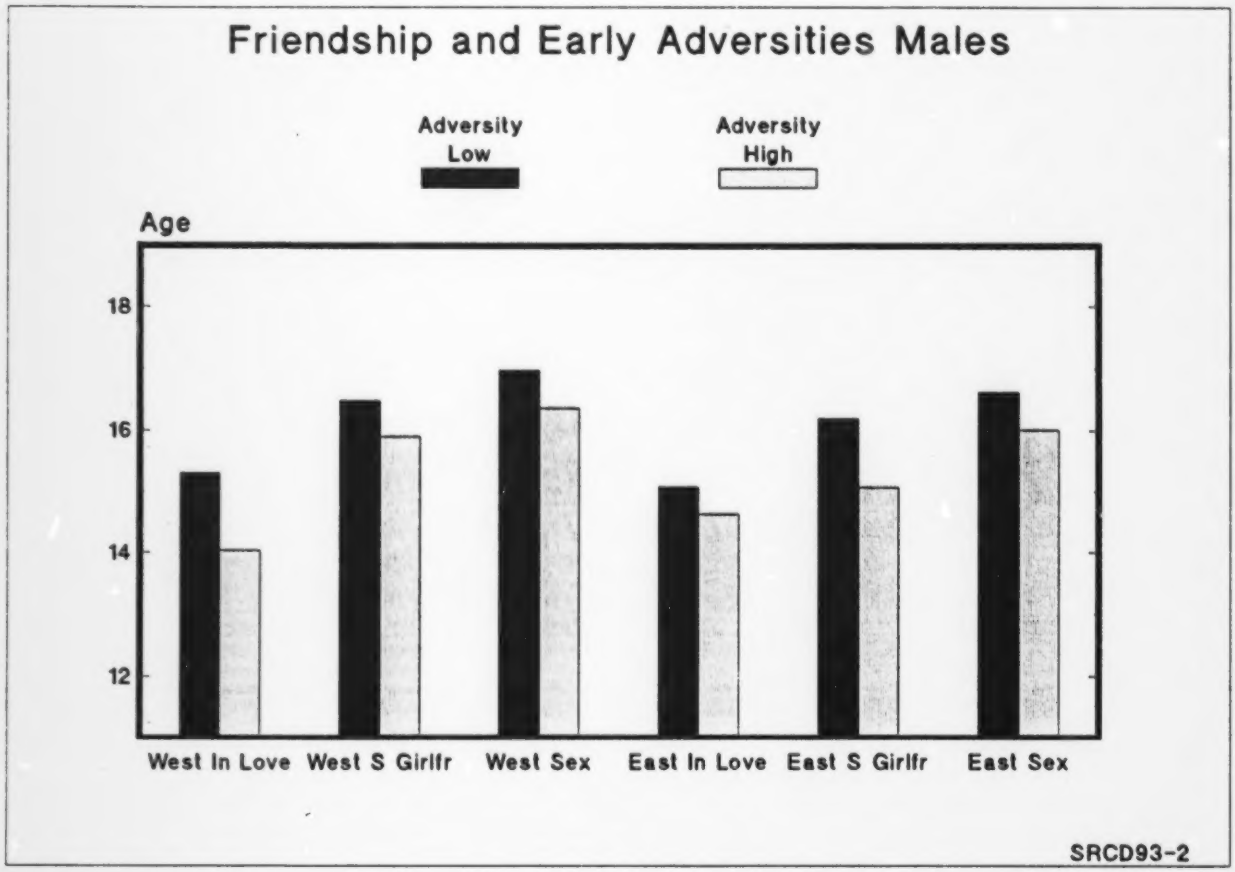
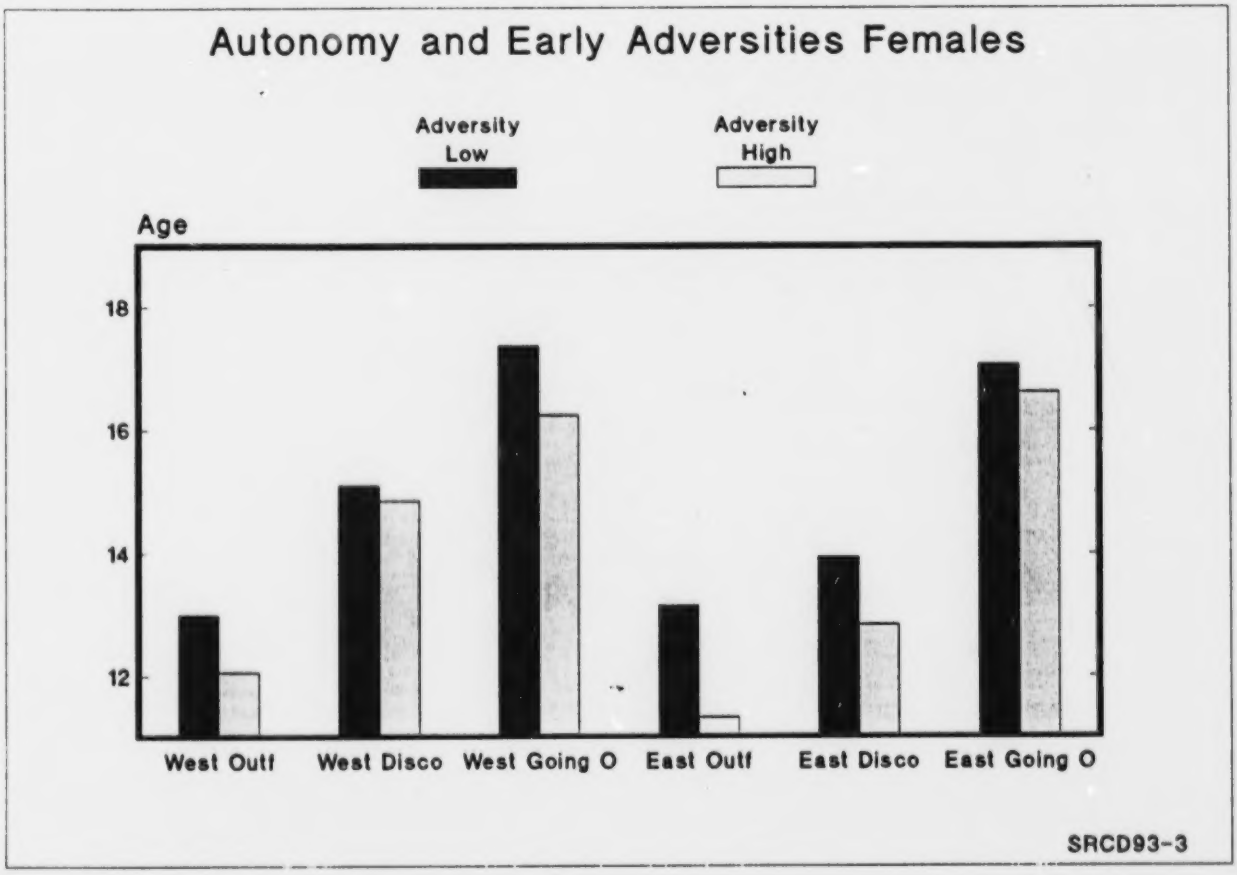
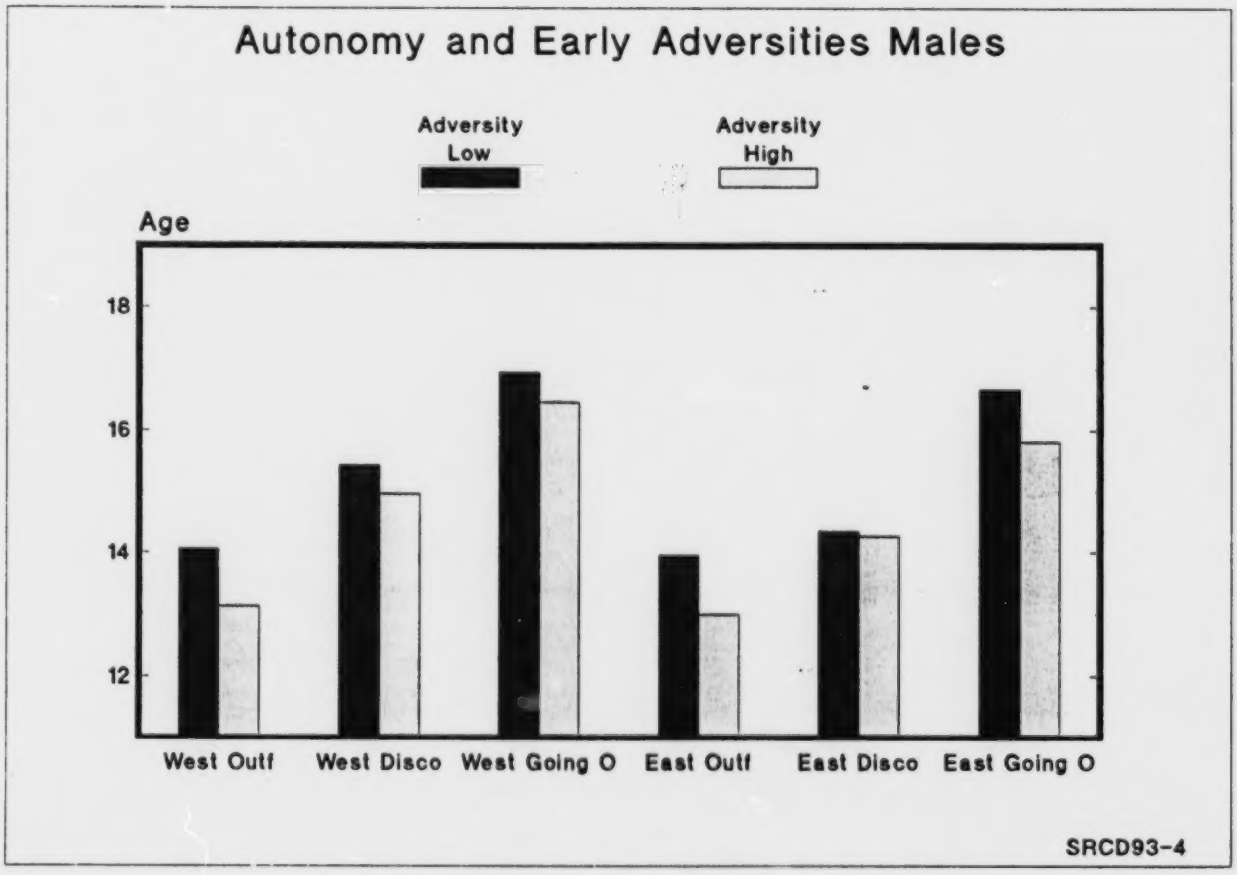

Friendship and Early Adversities Males
Adversity Low
Adversity High
Age
18
16
14
12
West In Love
West S Girlfr
West Sex
East In Love
East S Girlfr
East Sex
SRCD93-2


Autonomy and Early Adversities Females
Adversity Low
Adversity High
Age
18
16
14
12
West Outf
West Disco
West Going O
East Outf
East Disco
East Going O
SRCD93-3


Autonomy and Early Adversities Males
Adversity Low
Adversity High
Age
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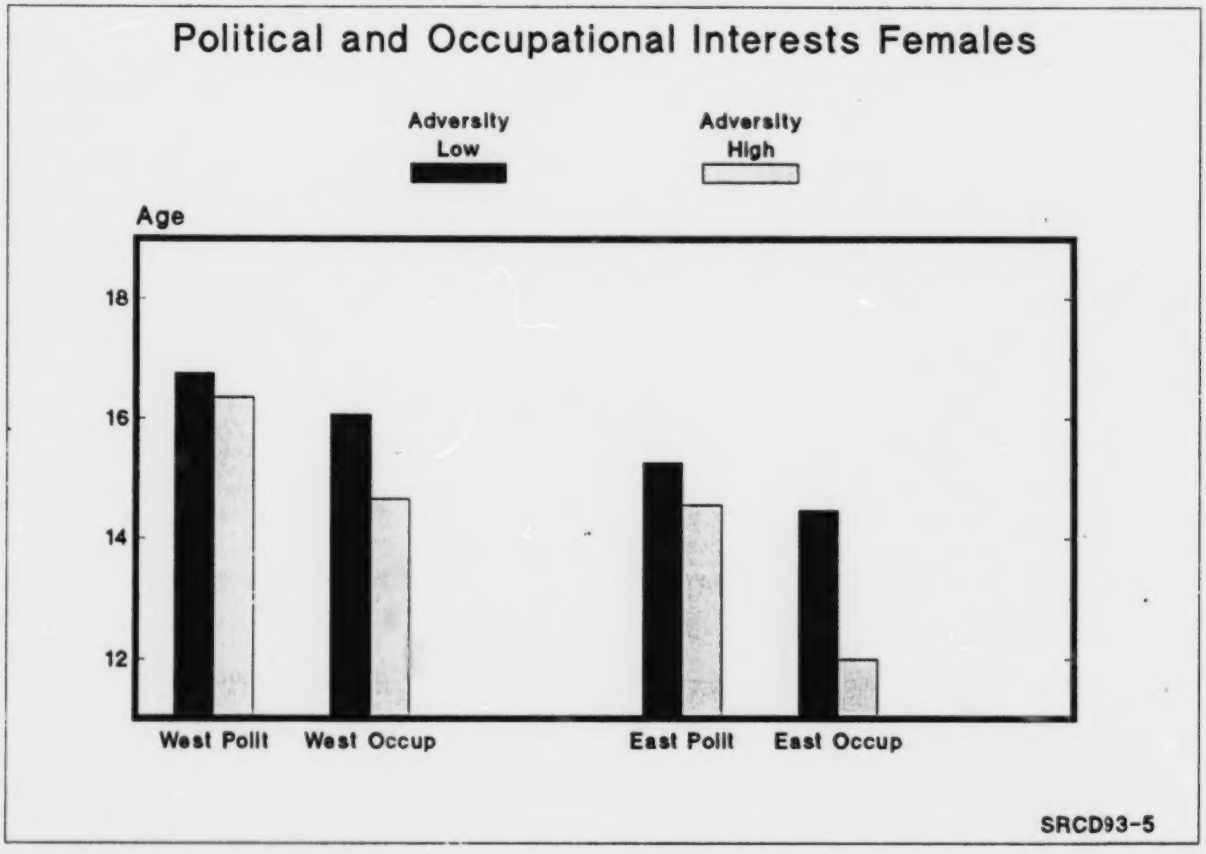
West Outf
West Disco
West Going O
East Outf
East Disco
East Going O
SRCD93-4


Political and Occupational Interests Females
Adversity Low
Adversity High
Age
18
16
14
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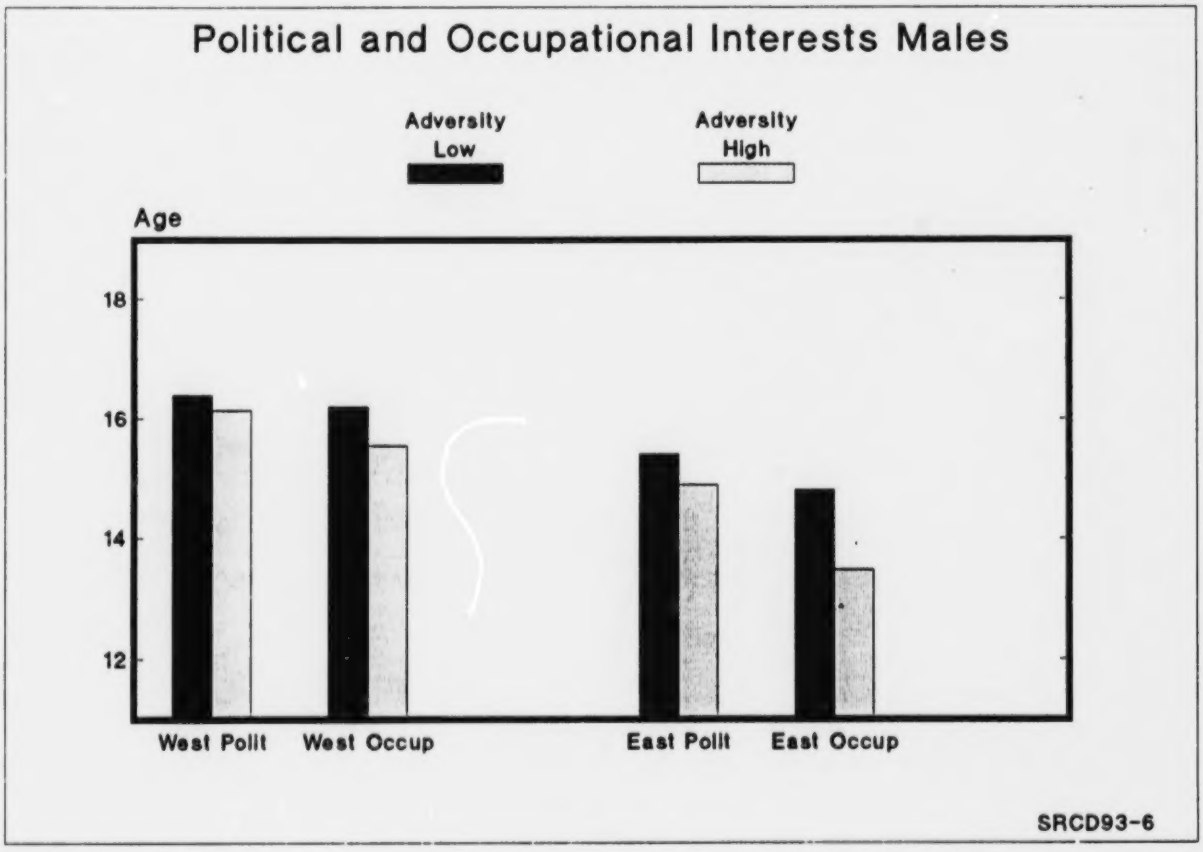
West Polit
West Occup
East Polit
East Occup
SRCD93-5


Political and Occupational Interests Males
Adversity Low
Adversity High
Age
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